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INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1195
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1277
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CHJUSMAGK SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
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DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO EAP A/S HILL ON TRAVEL IN BEIJING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/06/2016

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S SEP 6 MEETING WITH DEFENSE MINISTER
YOON

Classified By: AMB. ALEXANDER VERSHBOW. REASONS 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a September 6 discussion with the Ambassador, Minister of National Defense Yoon Kwang-ung cited widespread controversy within Korean society over the transfer of OPCON issue and strongly urged the USG to agree to 2012 as the X year, rather than pressing for 2009. He predicted that an agreement on 2012 would calm Korea and that retired generals and others voicing concern would come to fully support its implementation. The Ambassador suggested that Korean officials strive to shift the focus of the OPCON transfer debate away from the false notion that Korea is "regaining its sovereignty" to instead emphasize the strength and importance of the U.S.-ROK Alliance and the fact that it was becoming a more balanced partnership.

¶2. (C) During the hour-long meeting, Minister Yoon also urged close consultation on the North Korean nuclear threat; claimed the ROK is in no position to increase spending to accommodate Boeing's price for procurement of the E-X; cautioned that SMA negotiations could stretch beyond the end of this year; pledged that he is doing everything in his power to secure the Jikdo air-to-surface training range; and explained that ROKG decisions on troop contributions to UNIFIL in Lebanon and troop extension in Iraq would await further assessments of the security situation on the ground in both countries. Minister Yoon shared the Ambassador's hope that the September 14 summit meeting in Washington will serve to demonstrate the continuing strength of the U.S.-ROK Alliance as well as highlighting other positive developments in U.S.-South Korean relations. END SUMMARY.

OPCON TRANSFER

¶3. (C) The Ambassador met on September 6 with ROK Minister for National Defense Yoon Kwang-ung at the latter's request. The meeting began and ended with Yoon strongly urging the U.S. Government to agree to 2012 as the year for the transfer

of operational control, rather than pressing for an earlier transition. Concerns that transfer of OPCON equates to U.S. "abandonment" of the Republic of Korea have led to widespread opposition from both ruling and opposition party members, as well as numerous conservative groups throughout Korean society and the media. MND Yoon said he believed that those advocating early transfer, as well as those calling for a longer period of transition, were sincerely committed to the health of the U.S.-ROK Alliance, but stressed his own belief that "2012 would be much better for the Alliance."

¶4. (C) The Ambassador acknowledged the concerns expressed from all sides. He stated that SECDEF Rumsfeld and U.S. military commanders were convinced the transfer could be completed in three years, but we obviously needed mutual agreement on how fast the transition should take. The Ambassador added that what concerned him most was that what should be seen as a positive development in the evolution of the Alliance was generating so much controversy and anxiety in Korean society. He suggested that Korean officials strive to shift the focus of the debate away from the false notion that Korea was "regaining its sovereignty" to instead emphasize the strength and importance of the U.S.-ROK Alliance, and the fact it was becoming a more balanced partnership.

¶5. (C) Minister Yoon agreed, commenting that he would remember the Ambassador's words when next called to answer questions on the issue at the National Assembly. "I feel the values shared by the United States and the ROK means we are essentially on the same path," Yoon said. "With that as our base, I think we should work together to sustain and develop our Alliance." Yoon went on to express concern over the

"politicization" of a 2009 transfer, stating that he believed a thorough discussion within the National Assembly was the most democratic way to resolve the issue. The Ambassador thanked Yoon for recent comments he had made regarding U.S. provision of "bridging capabilities," noting that it would be useful for the ROKG to more broadly disseminate that reassurance to the public. Yoon stated that "2012" would be the ROK position going into SPI 10 and the MCM/SCM meetings in Washington. He confidently predicted that once the United States and the ROK reach agreement on an appropriate "X Year," the issue would calm down considerably in Korea, and that retired generals and others now voicing opposition would come to fully support implementation of the plan.

DPRK NUCLEAR ISSUE

¶6. (C) Turning briefly to the North Korea nuclear issue, Minister Yoon told the Ambassador that, regardless of the OPCON issue, it was important for the United States and South Korea to consult closely as the threat of a North Korean nuclear test appeared to be a growing concern.

BOEING E-X PROCUREMENT (AWACS)

¶7. (C) Minister Yoon raised the current pricing dispute between the ROKG and Boeing over ROK procurement of the E-X (AWACS) planes. Calling the ROK defense budget and Boeing's current price "disparate," Yoon claimed the ROK was not in a position to further increase spending for the project. The Ambassador said he was pleased the ROKG selected Boeing because it provided the highest degree of interoperability and the best capability, which was especially important as we transfer OPCON. He encouraged MND to negotiate directly with Boeing to reach an agreed price, reminding Yoon that the ROK had been warned the price would go up since Boeing's subcontractor prices had only been guaranteed until July 1. Unfortunately, the ROK had taken a very long time to reach its procurement decision. Keep negotiating, the Ambassador urged, adding that he very much wanted to see this project go through soon.

¶8. (C) The Ambassador raised the SMA negotiation, stating that the USG was looking for a more equitable share from the ROK of at least 50%. Minister Yoon replied that Secretary Rumsfeld had "never failed" to raise the issue with him in the past and that he fully expected he would do so again at the SCM. Each time the Secretary of Defense did so he conveyed those views to MOFAT, Yoon said. He added that he was confident a satisfactory agreement could be reached, but warned it may not be accomplished until sometime after the end of the year, "like last time."

JIKDO

¶9. (C) On the status of the Jikdo air-to-surface training range, Yoon stated that MND had taken "steps of progress" and that he personally had met twice with the Mayor of Kunsan City to discuss the issue. The ROKG was expected to announce its compensation plans very soon, Yoon advised. The people of Kunsan would then have until September 20th to agree or not. Yoon promised to do everything in his power, adding his personal assessment that it was "O.K. to have our hopes up a little."

UNIFIL and IRAQ

¶10. (C) Asked to elaborate on ROK plans to contribute to UNIFIL in Lebanon, Yoon replied that Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon wanted to send combat troops (not merely a medical team) to Lebanon but that MOFAT first planned on sending an assessment team to the area. Thereafter, the South Korean government would have a "comprehensive discussion" that would include the possibility of dispatching ground forces. He deferred any further questions to MOFAT, the lead ministry for the issue.

¶11. (C) Asked about ROK plans to extend its troop commitment to Iraq, Minister Yoon replied that he has effectively issued a "gag order" until mid-November when he said the ROK government would address the issue. He said he hoped the USG would also refrain from public remarks until then, "so as not to further complicate U.S.-ROK relations." In the meantime, the Defense Committee of the ROK National Assembly would visit Iraq to assess the current situation and prepare for that national debate. The Ambassador noted there was also a serious debate underway in the United States, but stressed it would be irresponsible to abandon the Iraqi people at this time. We must persevere, the Ambassador said, adding that the ROK's continued commitment was very important to the success of our efforts there.

U.S.-ROK SUMMIT

¶12. (C) The Ambassador and Minister Yoon shared the view that the September 14 summit meeting in Washington was an opportunity to demonstrate the continued strength of the U.S.-ROK Alliance, while also highlighting other positive developments in U.S.-South Korean relations, as well as ROK contributions elsewhere in the world. Although we may "sway a little," the Republic of Korea and the United States would "eventually get to where we both want to go," Yoon commented to the Ambassador. He also predicted that since the Roh Administration had chosen to tackle so many difficult issues, such as FTA, Yongsan relocation and the transfer of OPCON, future U.S. and South Korean leaders would have a "smoother ride."

VERSHBOW